

Formalist Approaches

I. THE PROCESS OF FORMALIST ANALYSIS: MAKING THE CLOSE READER

The term *formalism* as a critical approach means that obviously we are to be alert to “form.” But to say that is just as obviously to beg the question “What is form?” And we cannot say simply that form is structure, or that structure is form, for that is to go in circles. So what are the ways to appreciate form?

Intensive reading begins with a sensitivity to the words of the text and all their **denotative** and **connotative** values and implications. An awareness of multiple meanings, even the **etymologies** of words as traced in dictionaries, will offer significant guidelines to what the work says. Usually adequate for most readers is one of the standard collegiate dictionaries. But one should also be aware of the vastly larger resources in unabridged dictionaries and especially the details and examples of historical changes in word meanings as recorded in the most recent edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary*. So first let us look at the words and the sentences in which we find them.

But just as we begin to study closely the words and their meanings, almost simultaneously we must also begin to look for structural relationships and patterns—not just in the words and their relationships, but also in larger units. Form becomes much more than sentence patterns; it becomes the relationship of **stanzas** in a poem, or the interplay of an **octave** and a **sestet** in a **sonnet**. It becomes the **tone** or **mood** that the text builds, and possibly the shifting and alternating of moods. It becomes the sequence of plot elements, even episodes, in a narrative, or the juxtaposition of scenes in a play. It becomes the relationship between the teller of the narrative and the hearer, possibly the **ambiguity** of the teller’s version of the story. Because the reader’s response is in a very important sense part of the formal structure of a text, we also include in this chapter Reader-Response Theory, which was a reaction to the text-only centeredness of formalism.

So let us assume that now we have some degree of knowledge of the words of the text, at least in their denotative senses. Let us also assume that we can mentally plot out the sequence of actions, or of sequences and shifting of what the words seem to be telling us. Now we can note that some of these words are deeply connotative also, or perhaps they name objects that have symbolic value, and as we probe the connotations and **symbols** they take on associations, or develop patterns that somehow have relevance within themselves and to other patterns. Images emerge as more and more important, perhaps insistently forcing themselves to the fore. We note that certain images, or colors, or references to time—a host of possibilities in our human experience—keep coming up. Some of these may contribute to the setting of the work, its actual place and time, or more subtly, its ambience. Bit by formal bit, we think we begin to see a theme emerging from the work.

None of this is happening in any set sequence. It is more like when we walk into a room new to us, crowded with people, furniture, art works, a fire in the hearth. How do we see things? How do our eyes move across the scene? What do we see first, what next?

In the printed text perhaps the next thing is an **allusion** that has caught our attention, a reference to a bit of history or mythology, or to another work of literature. Maybe a word has taken on more than one meaning, causing us to read the text at more than one level; or we suspect that **irony** is developing in what we see, and we become suspicious that first impressions need modification. Or details of a narrative seem especially vivid or striking, but not yet clearly important as we move through the plot’s complication—and then, suddenly perhaps, the narrative reaches a climactic point, and all details fall into place by the point in the narrative that we sometimes call the *dénouement*.

Then there is a sense of closure, a sense of fulfillment of the expectations that have been built up.

What did the author do by so arranging those words, those images and symbols, those details of plot and action? How did the author “achieve” this accomplishment? (We will return to the concept of “achieved content” later in this chapter.)

In retrospect, we can say that what the author did was to make us see that internal relationships gradually reveal a form, a principle by which all subordinate patterns can be accommodated and accounted for. When all the words, phrases, **metaphors**, images, and symbols are examined in terms of each other and of the whole, any literary text worth our efforts will display its own internal logic. When that logic has been established, the reader is close to identifying the overall form of the work.

So now, in review, what must we do to make ourselves close readers in a formalist way? Let this list remind us of what we shall look for in the works we will study in this chapter: structure, shape, interplay, interrelationships, denotations and connotations, contexts, images, symbols, repeated details, climax (rising action, falling action), *dénouement*, balances and tensions, **rhythms** and **rhymes** that catch our attention, sounds that do the same, the speaker’s apparent voice, a

single line—or even a word—set off all by itself. Whatever, in other words, contributes to the uniqueness of the work.

II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF FORMALIST CRITICISM

A. The Course of Half a Century

Formalism, as we use the term in this book, emphasizes the manner of reading literature that was most significantly given its special dimensions by English and American critics in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. To many, indeed to most, students of literature during that era, this approach was known as the New Criticism. However, though the New Critics held sway in literary criticism for a long time, today they have been critiqued by more contextual approaches and joined by new formalisms as well. In the last third of the century, the New Criticism came to be called by other names, not always favorable, especially in the face of more politically and culturally based approaches. Now the New Criticism is the “old” criticism, to be sure, but its emphasis on form and close reading still informs and underlies subsequent approaches. Being a good reader of literature and using any approach to understanding literature necessitates reading closely and reading well. Reading well is what the New Critics helped us learn to do—especially as they succeeded the traditional approaches such as historical criticism.

The New Critics taught us to look at the individual work of art as an **organic form**. They articulated the concept that in organic form there is a consistency and an internal validity that we should appreciate. In doing so, we would make the work part of our consciousness.

One of the most salient considerations of the New Critics was emphasis on form, on the work of art as an object. Can we imagine any art—whether literary, musical, plastic, or dramatic, and regardless of its era, even our own—when formlessness is sometimes important and that does not have some sense of form? The form need not be geometric or physical or otherwise perceptible to the eye, and indeed often it is not, but it is there. To be sure, it might be most easily perceived first at a physical level: the external and obvious shape of a statue, the geometric pattern of arches and of horizontal and vertical lines in a building, the four-line stanza of Sappho, or the careful physical shape of a sonnet or a haiku. The New Critics did not invent these forms, but they helped us read better by reminding us of what was there in the past and teaching us how to read the new—the new forms, new symbols, new ironies.

B. Backgrounds of Formalist Theory

Classical art and aesthetics amply testify to a preoccupation with form. Plato exploits dialectic and shapes the movement toward Socratic wisdom with his imagery, metaphor, dramatic scenes, characterization, setting, and tone. Aristotle's *Poetics* recommends an “orderly arrangement of parts” that form a beautiful whole or “organism.” Horace admonishes the would-be poet: “In short, be your subject

what it will, let it be simple and unified.” And some awareness of formalism is at least implicit in many other classical, medieval, and Renaissance treatises on art or poetics.

But the Romantic movement in Europe in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries intensified speculations about form in literature. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) brought to readers of English the conception of a dynamic *imagination* as the shaping power and unifier of vision—a conception he had acquired from his studies of the German philosophical idealists: Kant, Hegel, Fichte, and Schelling. Such a conception encouraged discrimination between a poem and other forms of discourse by stressing the poem's power to elicit delight as a “whole” and “distinctive gratification from each component *part*.” In a “*legitimate poem*,” Coleridge declared, the parts “mutually support and explain each other; all in their proportion harmonizing with, and supporting the purpose and known influences of metrical arrangement.”

This interrelationship between the whole and the parts—**organic form**—was manifested in a consistently recurring image among the Romantics—the image of growth, particularly of vegetation. Perhaps because of the Romantics' infatuation with nature, the analogy usually likened the internal life of a painting or poem to the quintessential unity of parts within a tree, flower, or plant: as the seed determines, so the organism develops and lives. In a letter to John Taylor (February 27, 1818) Keats wrote that one of his “axioms” was “That if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.” Shelley uses imagery of growth and of vegetation several times in his “Defence of Poetry.” In talking of the relationship of sounds in poetry, he counsels against “the vanity of translation; it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as to seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower. . . .” He calls the thoughts of the poet “the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time,” claiming, “All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially.” And again of poetry,

... this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed. . . . The instinct and intuition of the poetical faculty is still more observable in the plastic and pictorial arts; a great statue or picture grows under the power of the artist as a child in the mother's womb. . . .

In America, Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), extending Coleridge's theory, asserted the excellence of short **lyric** poems and short tales because they can maintain and transmit a single, unitary effect more successfully than can long works like *Paradise Lost*. In “The Philosophy of Composition” Poe demonstrated how the parts of his “The Raven” allegedly developed from the single effect he desired. Poe also reprimanded certain contemporary poets like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow for committing what he called the “heresy of the didactic” by tacking on obtrusive (thus inorganic) moral lessons and accordingly violating the lyric effects of their poems.

Later in the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth, Henry James in "The Art of Fiction" and the prefaces to his tales and novels argued for fiction as a "fine art" and for the intricate, necessary interrelationships of parts and the whole:

There are bad and good novels, as there are bad pictures and good pictures; but that is the only distinction in which I can see any meaning, and I can as little imagine speaking of a novel of character as I can imagine speaking of a picture of character. When one says picture one says of character, when one says novel one says of incident, and the terms seem to be transposed at will. What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident BUT the illustration of character? What is either a picture or a novel that is *not* of character? What else do we seek in it and find in it? It is an incident for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and look at you in a certain way; or if it not be an incident, I think it will be hard to say what it is.

James implies the same interdependence and kinship for all other aspects of a work of fiction—setting, theme, scene and narrative, image and symbol. When the artist is attending to his or her craft, nothing that goes into the work will be wasted, and form will be present: "Form alone *takes*, and holds and preserves, substance—saves it from the welter of helpless verbiage that we swim in as in a sea of tasteless tepid pudding." When the work achieves "organic form," everything will count.

C. The New Criticism

Although there were antecedents from Plato through James, a systematic and methodological formalist approach to literary criticism appeared only with the rise in the 1930s of what came to be called the New Criticism. Coming together originally at Vanderbilt University in the years following World War I, the New Critics included a teacher-scholar-poet, John Crowe Ransom, and several bright students—Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Cleanth Brooks. Associated at first in an informal group that discussed literature, they in time adopted the name of Fugitives and published an elegant literary magazine called *The Fugitive* in Nashville from 1922 to 1925. When the poetry and critical essays of T. S. Eliot came to their attention, they found sturdy reinforcement for ideas that were emerging from their study and writing of lyric poetry. Ideas thus shared and promoted included literature viewed as an organic tradition, the importance of strict attention to form, a conservatism related to classical values, the ideal of a society that encourages order and tradition, a preference for ritual, and the rigorous and analytical reading of literary texts. Eliot was particularly influential in his formulation of the **objective correlative** ("a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of [a] *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts are given, the emotion is immediately invoked"). Eliot was also influential in his endorsement of the English **Metaphysical poets** of the seventeenth century for their success in blending "states of mind and feeling" in a single "verbal equivalent." Such developments strengthened the emergent New Criticism, which by

the 1950s had become the dominant critical system in such influential journals as *Sewanee Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Southern Review*, and *The Hudson Review* and in college and university English departments.

The New Critics sought precision and structural tightness in the literary work; they favored a style and tone that tended toward irony; they insisted on the presence within the work of everything necessary for its analysis; and they called for an end to a concern by critics and teachers of English with matters outside the work itself—the life of the author, the history of his or her times, or the social and economic implications of the literary work. In short, they turned the attention of teachers, students, critics, and readers to the essential matter: *what* the work says and *how* it says it as inseparable issues. In this they were quite radical.

Members and disciples of the group advanced their critical theory and techniques through a series of brilliant college textbooks on literary analysis: *Understanding Poetry* (1939) and *Understanding Fiction* (1943) by Brooks and Warren; *Understanding Drama* (1945) by Brooks and Robert B. Heilman; *The Art of Modern Fiction* by Ray B. West, Jr., and Robert W. Stallman; and *The House of Fiction* (1950) by Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate. After 1942, *The Explicator*, a monthly publication, published hundreds of short textual explications of great varieties of literary works; and prestigious literary journals and quarterlies still publish articles that show the continuing influence of the New Criticism.

But even as the formalist approach of the New Critics was influencing readers, teachers, and students throughout the universities of the United States, well into the second half of the century, others were pointing to what they perceived to be deficiencies or worse in that approach. Frank Lentricchia in *After the New Criticism* (1980) offers a helpful overview of what was happening. He uses 1957 and the publication of three books that year to give one benchmark for the turn to other approaches and emphases. The three are Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, Cleanth Brooks and W. K. Wimsatt's *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, and Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image*. Coming hard upon Murray Krieger's *New Apologists for Poetry* (1956), they seem to fulfill, Lentricchia says, Krieger's prediction "that the New Criticism had done all it could do for American literary critics.... By about 1957, the moribund condition of the New Criticism and the literary needs it left unfulfilled placed us in a critical void. Even in the late 1940s, however, those triumphant times of the New Criticism, a theoretical opposition was already gathering strength" (3–4).

D. Reader-Response Criticism: A Reaction

Reader-response theory arose in large measure as a reaction against the New Criticism. If formalism regards a piece of literature as an art object with an existence of its own, independent of or not necessarily related to its author, its readers, the historical time it depicts, or the historical period in which it was written, formalism finds all meaning and value in it and regards everything else as extraneous, including readers, whom formalist critics regard as downright dangerous as sources of interpretation. To such critics, relying on readers as a source

of meaning—precisely what reader-response criticism does—is to fall victim to subjectivism, and relativism.

Reader-response critics take a radically different approach. They feel that readers have been ignored in discussions of the reading process, when they should have been the central concern. The argument goes something like this: a text does not even exist, in a sense, until it is read by some reader. Indeed, the reader has a part in creating or actually does create the text. It is somewhat like the old question posed in philosophy classes: if a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound? Reader-response critics are saying that in effect, if a text does not have a reader, it does not exist—or at least, it has no meaning. It is readers, with whatever experience they bring to the text, who give it its meaning. Whatever meaning it may have inheres in the reader, and thus it is the reader who should say what a text means.

We should, perhaps, point out here that reader-response theory is by no means a monolithic critical position. Those who give an important place to *readers* and their *responses* in interpreting a work come from a number of different critical camps. Reader-response critics see formalist critics as narrow, dogmatic, elitist, and certainly wrong-headed in essentially refusing readers even a place in the reading-interpretive process. Conversely, reader-response critics see themselves, as Jane Tompkins has put it, “willing to share their critical authority with less tutored readers and at the same time to go into partnership with psychologists, linguists, philosophers, and other students of mental functioning” (223).

Although reader-response ideas were present in critical writing as long ago as the 1920s, most notably in that of I. A. Richards, and in the 1930s in D. W. Harding’s and Louise Rosenblatt’s work, it was not until the mid-twentieth-century that they began to gain currency. Walker Gibson, writing in *College English* in February 1950, talked about “mock readers,” who enact roles that actual readers feel compelled to play because the author clearly expects them to by the way the text is presented (265–69). By the 1960s and continuing into the present as a more or less concerted movement, reader-response criticism had gained enough advocates to mount a frontal assault on the bastions of formalism.

Because the ideas underlying reader-response criticism are complex, and because their proponents frequently present them in technical language, it will be well to enumerate the forms that have received most attention and to attempt as clear a definition of them as possible.

Although individual reader-response theorists will differ on a given point, the following tenets reflect the main perspectives in the position as a whole. First, in literary interpretation, the text is not the most important component; the reader is. In fact, there is no text unless there is a reader. And the reader is the only one who can say what the text is; in a sense, the reader creates the text as much as the author does. This being the case, to arrive at meaning, critics should reject the autonomy of the text and concentrate on the reader and the reading process, the interaction that takes place between the reader and the text.

This premise perplexes people trained in some traditional methods of literary analysis. It declares that reader-response theory is subjective and relative, whereas earlier theories sought for as much objectivity as possible in a field of study that has a high degree of subjectivity by definition. Paradoxically, the ultimate source of this subjectivity is modern science itself, which has become increasingly skeptical that any objective knowledge is possible. Einstein’s theory of relativity stands as the best known expression of that doubt. Also, the philosopher Thomas S. Kuhn’s demonstration (in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*) that scientific fact is dependent on the observer’s frame of reference reinforces the claims of subjectivity.

Another special feature of reader-response theory is that it is based on rhetoric, the art of persuasion, which has a long tradition in literature dating back to the Greeks, who originally employed it in oratory. Rhetoric, among other roles, now refers to the myriad devices or strategies used to get the reader to respond to a literary work in certain ways. Thus, by establishing the reader firmly in the literary equation, the ancients may be said to be precursors of modern reader-response theory. Admittedly, however, when Aristotle, Longinus, Horace, Cicero, and Quintilian applied rhetorical principles in judging a work, they concentrated on the presence of the formal elements within the work rather than on the effect they would produce on the reader.

In view, then, of the emphasis on the audience in reader-response criticism, its relationship to rhetoric is quite obvious. Wayne Booth in his *Rhetoric of Fiction* was among the earliest of modern critics to restore readers to consideration in the interpretive act. The New Criticism had actually proscribed readers, maintaining that it was a critical **fallacy**, the **affective fallacy**, to mention any effects that a piece of literature might have on them. And although Booth did not go as far as some critics in assigning readers the major role in interpretation, he certainly did give them prominence and called rhetoric “the author’s means of controlling his reader” (Preface to *Rhetoric of Fiction*). For example, in a close reading of Jane Austen’s *Emma*, Booth demonstrates the rhetorical strategies that Austen uses to ensure the reader’s seeing things through the heroine’s eyes.

In 1925 I. A. Richards, usually associated with the New Critics, published *Principles of Literary Criticism*, in which he constructed an affective system of interpretation, that is, one based on emotional responses. Unlike the New Critics who were to follow in the next two decades, Richards conceded that the scientific conception of truth is the correct one and that poetry provides only pseudostatements. These pseudostatements, however, are crucial to the psychic health of humans because they have now replaced religion as fulfilling our desire—*appetency* is Richards’s term—for truth, that is, for some vision of the world that will satisfy our deepest needs. Matthew Arnold had in the nineteenth century predicted that literature would fulfill this function. Richards tested his theory by asking Cambridge students to write their responses to and assessments of a number of short unidentified poems of varying quality. He then analyzed and classified the responses and published them along with his own interpretations in *Practical Criticism*. Richards’s methodology is decidedly reader-response, but the

use he made of his data is new critical. He arranged the responses he had received into categories according to the degrees to which they differed from the "right" or "more adequate" interpretation, which he demonstrated by referring to "the poem itself."

Louise Rosenblatt, Walker Gibson, and Gerald Prince are critics who, like Richards, affirm the importance of the reader but are not willing to relegate the text to a secondary role. Rosenblatt feels that irrelevant responses finally have to be excluded in favor of relevant ones and that a text can exist independently of readers. However, she advances a transactional theory: a poem comes into being only when it receives a proper ("aesthetic") reading, that is, when readers interact with a given text (see, for example, Ch. 3, "Efferent and Aesthetic Reading"). Gibson, essentially a formalist, proposes a mock reader, a role that the real reader plays because the text asks him or her to play it "for the sake of the experience." Gibson posits a dialogue between a speaker (the author?) and the mock reader. The critic, overhearing this dialogue, paraphrases it, thereby revealing the author's strategies for getting readers to accept or reject whatever the author wishes them to. Gibson by no means abandons the text, but he injects the reader further into the interpretive operation as a way of gaining fresh critical insights. Using a different terminology, Prince adopts a perspective similar to Gibson's. Wondering why critics have paid such close attention to narrators (omniscient, first person, unreliable, etc.) and have virtually ignored readers, Prince too posits a reader, whom he calls the *narratee*, one of a number of hypothetical readers to whom the story is directed. These readers, actually produced by the narrative, include the real reader with book in hand; the virtual reader, for whom the author thinks he or she is writing; and the ideal reader of perfect understanding and sympathy; yet none of these is necessarily the narratee. Prince demonstrates the strategies by which the narrative creates the readers (7-25).

The critics mentioned so far—except Prince—were the advance guard of the reader-response movement. While continuing to insist on the importance of the text in the interpretive act, they equally insist that the reader be taken into account; not to do so will, they maintain, either impoverish the interpretation or render it defective. As the advance guard, they cleared the way for the principal theorists of reader-response criticism. Though there will be disagreement on who belongs in this latter group, most scholars would recognize Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, Norman Holland, and Stanley Fish as having major significance in the movement.

Wolfgang Iser applies the philosophy of *phenomenology* to the interpretation of literature. Phenomenology stresses the perceiver's (in this case, the reader's) role in any perception (in this case, the reading experience) and asserts the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of separating anything known from the mind that knows it. According to Iser, the critic should not explain the text *as an object* but its *effect on the reader*. Iser's espousal of this position, however, has not taken him away from the text as a central part of interpretation. He also has posited an implied reader, one with "roots firmly planted in the structure of the text" (34). Still, his

phenomenological beliefs keep him from the formalist notion that there is one essential meaning of a text that all interpretations must try to agree on. Readers' experiences will govern the effects the text produces on them. Moreover, Iser says, a text does not tell readers everything; there are gaps or blanks, which he refers to as the "indeterminacy" of the text. Readers must fill these in and thereby assemble the meaning(s), thus becoming coauthors in a sense. Such meanings may go far beyond the single "best" meaning of the formalist because they are the products of such varied reader backgrounds. To be sure, Iser's implied readers are fairly sophisticated: they bring to the contemplation of the text a conversance with the conventions that enables them to decode the text. But the text can transcend any set of literary or critical conventions, and readers with widely different backgrounds may fill in those blanks and gaps with new and unconventional meanings. Iser's stance is that at the center of interpretation lies the reader's experience. Nor does this creation of text by the reader mean that the resultant text is subjective and no longer the author's. It is rather, says Iser, proof of the text's inexhaustibility.

Yet another kind of reader-oriented criticism, also rhetorically grounded, is *reception theory*, which documents reader responses to authors and/or their works in any given period. Such criticism depends heavily on reviews in newspapers, magazines, and journals and on personal letters for evidence of public reception. There are varieties of reception theory, one of the most important recent types promulgated by Hans Robert Jauss in his *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Jauss seeks to bring about a compromise between that interpretation which ignores history and that which ignores the text in favor of social theories. To describe the criteria he would employ, Jauss proposes the term *horizons of expectations* of a reading public. These result from what the public already understands about a genre and its conventions. For example, Pope's poetry was judged highly by his contemporaries, who valued clarity, decorum, and wit. The next century had a different horizon of expectations and thus actually called into question Pope's claim to being considered a poet at all. Similarly, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* was not well received by its mid-nineteenth-century readers, who objected to the impersonal, clinical, **naturalistic** style. Their horizon of expectations had conditioned them to appreciate an impassioned, lyrical, sentimental, and florid narrative method. Delayed hostile reader response to firmly established classics surfaced in the latter half of the twentieth century. *Huckleberry Finn* became the target of harsh criticism on the grounds that it contained racial slurs in the form of epithets like "nigger" and demeaning portraits of blacks. Schools have been in some instances required to remove the book from curriculums or reading lists of approved books and in extreme cases from library shelves.

Horizons of expectations do not establish the final meaning of a work. Thus, according to Jauss, we cannot say that a work is universal, that it will make the same appeal to or impact on readers of all eras. Is it possible, then, ever to reach a critical verdict about a piece of literature? Jauss thinks it is possible only to the extent that we regard our interpretations as stemming from a dialogue between

The importance of psychology in literary interpretation has long been recognized. Plato and Aristotle, for example, attributed strong psychological influence to literature. Plato saw this influence as essentially baneful: literature aroused people's emotions, especially those that ought to be stringently controlled. Conversely, Aristotle argued that literature exerted a good psychological influence; in particular, tragedy did, by effecting in audiences a *catharsis* or cleansing or purging of emotions. Spectators were thus calmed and satisfied, not excited or frenzied, after their emotional encounter.

As we note in our chapter on the psychological approach, one of the world's preeminent depth psychologists, Sigmund Freud, has had an incalculable influence on literary analysis with his theories about the unconscious and about the importance of sex in explaining much human behavior. Critics, then, have looked to Plato and Aristotle in examining the psychological relations between a literary work and its audience and to Freud in seeking to understand the unconscious psychological motivations of the characters in the literary work and of the author.

If, however, followers of Freud have been more concerned with the unconscious of literary characters and their creators, more recent psychological critics have focused on the *unconscious of readers*. Norman Holland, one such critic, argues that all people inherit from their mother an identity theme or fixed understanding of the kind of person they are. Whatever they read is processed to make it fit their identity theme, he asserts in "The Miller's Wife and the Professors: Questions about the Transactive Theory of Reading." In other words, readers interpret texts as expressions of their own personalities or psyches and thereby use their interpretations as a means of coping with life. Holland illustrates this thesis in an essay entitled "Hamlet—My Greatest Creation." This highly personal response to literature appears in another Holland article, "Recovering 'The Purloined Letter': Reading as a Personal Transaction." Here, Holland relates the story to his own attempt to hide an adolescent masturbatory experience.

Holland's theory, for all of its emphasis on readers and their psychology, does not deny or destroy the independence of the text. It exists as an object and as the expression of another mind, something different from readers themselves, something they can project onto. But David Bleich, in *Subjective Criticism*, denies that the text exists independent of readers. Bleich accepts the arguments of such contemporary philosophers of science as Thomas S. Kuhn who deny that objective facts exist. Such a position asserts that even what passes for scientific observation of something—of anything—is still merely individual and subjective perception occurring in a special context. Bleich claims that individuals everywhere classify things into three essential groups: objects, symbols, and people. Literature, a mental creation (as opposed to a concrete one), would thus be considered a symbol. A text may be an object in that it is paper (or other matter) and print, but its meaning depends on the symbolization in the minds of readers. Meaning is not found; it is developed. Better human relations will result from readers with widely differing views sharing and comparing their responses and thereby discovering more about motives and strategies for reading. The honesty and tolerance required in such

operations are bound to help in self-knowledge, which, according to Bleich, is the most important goal for everyone.

The last of the theorists to be treated in this discussion is Stanley Fish, who calls his technique of interpretation *affective stylistics*. Like other reader-oriented critics, Fish rebels against the so-called rigidity and dogmatism of the New Critics and especially against the tenet that a poem is a single, static object, a whole that has to be understood in its entirety at once. Fish's pronouncements on reader-response theory have come in stages. In an early stage (*Surprised by Sin*), he argued that meaning in a literary work is not something to be extracted, as a dentist might pull a tooth; meaning must be negotiated by readers, a line at a time. Moreover, they will be surprised by rhetorical strategies as they proceed. Meaning is *what happens to readers during this negotiation*. A text, in Fish's view, could lead readers on, even set them up, to make certain interpretations, only to undercut them later and force readers into new and different readings. So, the focus is on the reader; the process of reading is dynamic and sequential. Fish does insist, however, on a high degree of sophistication in readers: they must be familiar with literary conventions and must be capable of changing when they perceive they have been tricked by the strategies of the text. His term for such readers is "informed."

Later, in *Is There a Text in This Class?*, Fish modified the method described above by attributing more initiative to the reader and less control by the text in the interpretive act. Fish's altered position holds that readers actually create a piece of literature as they read it. Fish concludes that every reading results in a new interpretation that comes about because of the different strategies that readers use. The text as an independent director of interpretation has in effect disappeared. For Fish, interpretation is a communal affair. The readers just mentioned are informed; they possess linguistic competence; they form interpretive communities that have common assumptions; and, to repeat, they create texts when they pool their common reading techniques. These characteristics mean that such readers are employing the same or similar interpretive strategies and are thus members of the same interpretive community.

It seems reasonable to say that there may be more than one response to or interpretation of a work of literature and that this is true because responders and interpreters see things differently. It seems equally accurate to observe that to claim the meaning of literature rests exclusively with individual readers, whose opinions are all equally valid, is to make literary analysis ultimately altogether relative. Somewhere within these two points of view most critics and interpreters will fall. Fish himself has re-adjusted his views as time has gone by.

To summarize, two distinguishing features characterize reader-response criticism. One is the effect of the literary work on the reader, hence the moral-philosophical-psychological-rhetorical emphases in reader-response analysis: how does the work *affect* the reader, and what strategies or devices have come into play in the production of those effects? The second feature is the relegation of the text to secondary importance: the reader is of primary importance. Thus, reader-response

criticism attacks the authority of the text. This is where subjectivism comes in. If a text cannot have any existence except in the mind of the reader, then the text loses its authority. There is a shift from objective to subjective perspective. Texts mean what individual readers say they mean or what interpretive communities of readers say they mean. Thus, interpretation becomes the key to meaning—but without the ultimate authority of the text or the author.

When reader-response critics analyze the effect of the text on the reader, the analysis often resembles formalist criticism or rhetorical criticism or psychological criticism. The major distinction is the emphasis on the reader's response in the analysis. Meaning inheres in the reader and not in the text. This is where reception theory fits in. The same text can be interpreted by different readers or communities of readers in very different ways. A text's interpretive history may vary considerably, as with Freudian interpretations of *Hamlet* versus earlier interpretations. Readers bring their own cultural heritage along with them in their responses to literary texts, a fact that allows for the principle that texts speak to other texts only through the intervention of particular readers. Thus, reader-response criticism can appropriate other theories—as all theories attempt to do.

Reader-response theory is likely to strike many people as both esoteric and too subjective. Unquestionably, readers had been little considered in the New Criticism, but they may have been overemphasized by the theorists who seek to give them the final word in interpreting literature. Communication as a whole is predicated on the demonstrable claim that there are common, agreed-upon meanings in language, however rich, metaphorical, or symbolic. To contend that there are, even in theory, as many meanings in a poem as there are readers strongly calls into question the possibility of intelligible discourse. That some of the theorists themselves are not altogether comfortable with the logical implications of their position is evidenced by their positing of mock readers, informed readers, real readers, and implied readers—by which they mean readers of education, sensitivity, and sophistication.

Despite the potential dangers of subjectivism, reader-response criticism has been a corrective to literary dogmatism and a reminder of the richness, complexity, and diversity of viable literary interpretations, and it seems safe to predict that readers will never again be completely ignored in arriving at verbal meaning.

III. CONSTANTS OF THE FORMALIST APPROACH: SOME KEY CONCEPTS, TERMS, AND DEVICES

A. Form and Organic Form

We must, of course, begin with form. In systems of the past, the word *form* usually meant what we would call *external form*. Thus, when we identify a poem with

fourteen lines of **iambic pentameter**, a conventional pattern of rhymes, and a conventional division into two parts as a sonnet, we are defining its external form. The same kind of description takes place when we talk about couplets, **tercets**, **ottava rima**, **quatrains**, **Spenserian stanzas**, **blank verse**, or even **free verse**. But the formalist critic is only moderately interested in external forms (in fact, only when external form is related to the work's total form, when stanzaic or metrical pattern is integral to internal relationships, reverberations, patterns, and systems). The process of formalist analysis is complete only when everything in the work has been accounted for in terms of overall form.

Organic form is a particular concept important to the New Critics, inherited, as we have noted, from the English Romantics. In the Romantics, we find the emphasis on organicism not just in literary forms but in a broader, philosophical context, where the world itself is organic; objects within it are organisms that interact with each other in a larger organic universe. This notion may go so far as Wordsworthian pantheism, or what some thought to be pantheism, where a breeze in nature may awaken within the persona of the *Prelude* (in this case the poet himself) a "correspondent breeze" (1.35). Similarly there is the Romantic emphasis on the Aeolian lyre or harp, as in Coleridge's poem "The Eolian Harp," and the reference to the lyre in the imagery and symbolism of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," a notion that recurs in the second paragraph of Shelley's "Defence of Poetry." The vegetation imagery, mentioned earlier, is of course part of this organicism. Now the question for us is how this concept of organicism came into formalist criticism of the twentieth century, especially among critics many of whom expressed no fondness for English Romanticism. Also, in the context of "greening," what does it suggest today?

In the formalist approach, the assumption is that a given literary experience takes a shape proper to itself, or at the least that the shape and the experience are functions of each other. This may mean at a minimum that a precise metrical form couples with a complex of sounds in a line of verse to present one small bit of the experience. Or it may mean that a generic form, like that of the sonnet, is used repeatedly in a sonnet cycle to show the interrelationship of thoughts to images, or a problem to a comment or solution. In such a case, even though the overt structure of the sonnet is repetitive, still the experience in any one Italian sonnet is structured across the octave and sestet or in the English form across the three quatrains and the concluding couplet. In a larger work, a full-length play or a novel might adopt much more complex and subtle forms to communicate the experience, such as the interrelationships of plot and subplot in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Henry IV, Part 1*, or *The Tempest*; or in the complex **stream of consciousness** of Joyce's *Ulysses* or Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury*. Indeed, the fragmentation of story line and of time line in modern fiction and in some **absurdist drama** is a major formalist device used not only to generate within the reader the sense of the immediacy and even the chaos of experience but also to present the philosophical notion of nonmeaning and nihilism. Thus we have the seeming **paradox** that in some cases the absence of form *is* the form, precisely.

Statements that follow discovery of form must embrace what Ransom called local texture and logical structure (*World's Body* 347). The logical structure refers to the argument or the concept within the work; local texture comprises the particular details and devices of the work (for example, specific metaphors and images). However, such a dualistic view of a literary work has its dangers, for it might encourage the reduction of logical structure to *précis* or summary—what Brooks has called the “heresy of paraphrase.” In *Understanding Poetry*, Brooks and Warren simply include “idea,” along with rhythm and imagery, as a component of form: “the form of a poem is the organization of the material... for the creation of the total effect” (554). The emphasis, in any case, is upon accounting for all aspects of the work in seeking to name or define its form and effect. Mark Schorer pressed the distinction further between the critic’s proper concentration on *form* and an improper total concern with *content* only: “Modern [i.e., formalist] criticism has shown that to speak of content as such is not to speak of art at all, but of experience; and that it is only when we speak of the *achieved* content, the form, the work of art as a work of art, that we speak as critics. The difference between content, or experience, and achieved content, or art, is technique” (67). He goes on to say that “technique is the only means [an author] has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning, and, finally, of evaluating it.”

B. Texture, Image, Symbol

As we turn more specifically to **texture**, we find that as with form and its potential to embody meaning, **imagery** and metaphor are an integral part of the work, especially in the poem. Once again, the formalist critics—obviously—did not invent metaphor: Aristotle, very much a formalist, discussed metaphor in his *Poetics*. But the New Critics delighted in close analysis of imagery and metaphor, and they laid stress on a careful working out of imagery. The consistency of imagery in a lyric, whether it be a single dominant image throughout the poem or a pattern of multiple but related images, became for some an index to the quality of a given poem. Such consistency of imagery helped to create what John Crowe Ransom among others called texture. It was for such reasons that there was much interest in Metaphysical poetry and in the Metaphysical **conceit**. The interest was aided by publication of Herbert Grierson’s collection *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century* (1921). It was furthered by the attention of T. S. Eliot, Ransom, and Allen Tate. Critics praised the Metaphysical conceit because of its carefully worked out (“wrought”) images that were elaborated over a number of lines, richly textured and endowed with a complexity of meanings, as in John Donne’s “The Flea” or in the “stiff twin compasses” of his “Valediction: Forbidding Mourning.” Donne’s image of the “well-wrought urn” in “The Canonization” gave Cleanth Brooks the title to *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947).

When an image (or an incident or other discrete item) takes on meaning beyond its objective self, it moves into the realm of **symbol**. Here is a dilemma

for some formalist critics, those who espouse the autonomous and autotelic concept of a literary work so strenuously that anything outside it becomes a problem. Symbols may sometimes remain within the work, as it were; but it is the nature of symbols to have extensional possibilities, to open out to the world beyond the art object itself. When meaning and value outside the work of literature are the real purposes of the symbol, some formalist critics may find fault with the work. On the other hand, symbol is a way of using something integral to the work to reach beyond the work and engage the world of value outside the work and hence its meaning, external or internal.

A symbol is different from a metaphor. Metaphors are comparisons between two seemingly dissimilar things, while symbols associate two things. The symbol’s meaning is both literal and figurative and reaches out of the text to cultural and artistic contexts. No symbols have absolute meanings, because for example, different cultures will interpret the same symbol differently. Rather than asking what a given symbol means, we could ask what it *could* mean, or what it has meant. How we interpret the dark woods and pink ribbons of “Young Goodman Brown” will depend on how they are seen through the eyes of a given culture. Similarly, the journey means completely different things when we compare the journeys of Goodman Brown and Huckleberry Finn. Myth critics (see Chapter 7) tend to argue that certain symbols are universal, such as the sea or the sun, but their claims are disputed by critics more sensitive to cultural difference. Symbols are also distinct from allegories; **allegory** implies a one-on-one correspondence between symbol and referent, but a given work can contain symbols from so many different sources that it avoids the restrictions of allegory: think of Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, or Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*.

C. Fallacies

Another formalist term is the **intentional fallacy**, along with its corollary the affective fallacy. In the intentional fallacy, we are told, the critic or the reader makes the mistake of not divorcing the literary work from any intention that the author might have had for the work. Instead, say Wimsatt and Beardsley in *The Verbal Icon* (1954), the work must give us from within itself any intention that might be garnered, and we must not go to the author for his or her intention. At the very least the author is not a reliable witness. Wimsatt and Beardsley review the arguments of some of the intentionists, and there are legitimate considerations on both sides of the question. For us a proper middle ground would be to take note of external evidence when it seems worthy, but to accept the caution that the work itself must first and always be seen as a work unto itself, having now left the author’s care. Wimsatt and Beardsley also warned against the affective fallacy, wherein the work is judged by its effect on the reader or viewer, particularly its emotional effect. Again, however, those avoiding the reductionist tendency of formalist criticism would note that no work of literary art can be divorced from the reader and therefore from the reader’s response. For that matter, no less a critic

than Aristotle gave us the concept of catharsis, the purging of the audience at a tragedy that cleanses the emotions.

D. Point of View

A formalist approach also heeds **point of view**, especially the **omniscient third-person** narrator, which, like consistency of imagery, is generally considered a virtue in the work of literary art, for it preserves the internal form, the organic quality of the work. Conversely, a nonexistent point of view (that is, one in which several points of view are not clearly demarcated from each other) can flaw the work, for the work then may go in several directions and therefore have no integrity: the center does not hold; yet numerous modern and postmodern works have done just this.

In more restricted points of view, such as the **limited third-person** point of view, or the **first-person** point of view, the very form of the work is conditioned by the point of view to which the author limits the narrator. As Wayne Booth has reminded us, narrators may be either **reliable** (if they support the explicit or implicit moral norms of the author) or **unreliable** (if they do not). Thus Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises* is a completely reliable narrator, for he or she is the very embodiment of what is often called the “Hemingway code”; on the other hand, the narrator of Chuck Palahniuk’s novel *Fight Club* (1996) is unreliable in the extreme because he is delusional. Whatever the point of view we encounter, it has to be recognized as a basic means of control over the area or scope of the action, the quality of the fictional world offered to the reader, and even the reactions of the reader.

In a first-person narration the author may condition the form even more. Thus a young boy named Huckleberry Finn, who narrates his own story, must not be allowed to know more than a young boy such as he would know. His view is also limited to what he sees and reports. Nor does he understand all that he reports, not—at least—as a mature person devoid of cultural bias and prejudice might understand. In this first-person point of view, the narration is limited to a person’s telling. If the author wishes to communicate anything beyond that to the reader, that wish becomes a challenge in technique, for the information must be reported naively by Huck Finn and interpreted maturely by the reader on the basis of what the author has Huck Finn say. In this sense Huck Finn is honest on the one hand, but an unreliable narrator on the other. In some circumstances the author may choose to have a shifting point of view to achieve different effects at different times (possibly this is what Chaucer the author did to Chaucer the pilgrim). Or there may be multiple points of view, as in Faulkner’s *Sound and the Fury* or Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. Still another type is the point of view that would claim total objectivity—the scenic or dramatic: we read only the dialogue of characters, with no hints of a narrator to intrude any perspective other than what we get from the dialogue itself. All these points of view condition the form of literature, and a formalist approach must study them for the reader to appreciate the fullness of the work.

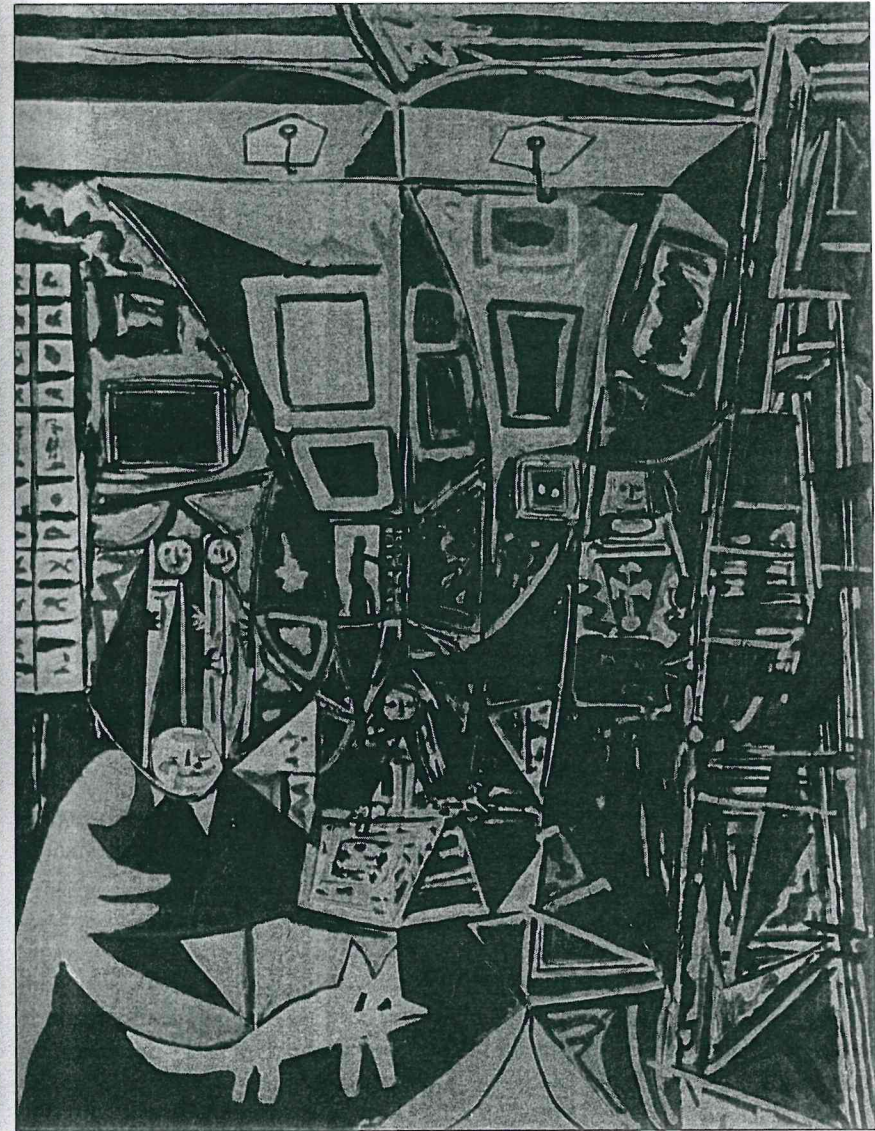


Figure 3.1. Pablo Picasso, *Las Meniñas conjunto sin Velázquez* (1957).

Museo Picasso, Barcelona, Spain/© DACS/The Bridgeman Art Library International/© 2009 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

E. The Speaker’s Voice

Failure to note point of view as an aspect of form will result in a misreading or in an inadequate reading of the work. This challenge to the reader may be further illustrated by turning briefly to lyric poetry, where tone of voice is analogous to point of view. Although we do not usually think of point of view as an

Pablo Picasso, *Las Meninas conjunto sin Velázquez* (28), Cannes (1957)

In this interpretation of Velázquez's painting Picasso breaks the composition down into colors and geometric shapes in a style of modern painting called "Cubism," which he helped invent. Against a set of washes ranging from teal to green to light green to yellow, Picasso overlays the rigid block-like bodies of the three young girls in the foreground and the two chaperones on the right, who have been interpreted as coffin-like vertical boxes with flipper-like hands and faces composed of an asterisk-like symbol. Added emphasis is placed on the windows in the room, which become a structural element balancing the forms of the characters; the windows seem to be heavily barred, adding a sense of tension. The mirror on the back wall is enlarged, but the king and queen are not shown. Neither is the painter of the canvas. The focus is on the dress of the Infanta, since it is alone in displaying a vibrant yellow. The entire focus is on the three maids: their hair, faces, and clothing stylized into cubes with minimal expressions.

Questions: How can we use formalist analysis of literature to help us read this painting? What are the primary structural relationships portrayed? Why are the dog and the man entering the back door so enlarged? What does it mean that the two "centers" of the traditional painting, the king and queen as well as the painter, are absent? The only character with any emotional register is the Infanta; why does she have such an angry look on her face?

aspect of lyric poetry, the fact is that in a lyric there is a speaker—that is, a first-person situation. This immediately sets a context and a set of circumstances, for the speaker is doing something, somewhere. Possibly there is also a hearer, a second person (we readers only *overhear* the speaker), so that the hearer also conditions the experience. In Robert Browning's "Andrea del Sarto" it means much to know that Andrea is addressing a woman and that they are among his paintings at a certain time of day. Consequently it is even more important to know what Andrea feels about his inadequacy as a painter and as a man: his tone of voice, as much as details revealed to us, will largely reveal those feelings. Conversely, another painter, Fra Lippo Lippi in the poem of that name, responds ebulliently to his world and his confidence about his ability to capture and interpret it in his painting: his colloquial, jovial tone communicates this attitude. In Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" the reader will go totally astray if he does not understand that the lover is a madman—and that the beloved though present has been murdered by him. In a more traditional love lyric or in one that describes a beautiful scene in nature, the speaker may reasonably be trusted to speak the truth. But how does one interpret the speaker's voice in Donne's "Song" ("Go and Catch a Falling Star")? What is the mixture of genial satire, sardonicism, mere playfulness? The way the reader hears the speaker will

When the poem, given its form, indeed may make the poem into poems by

varying the voice. So the formalist critic ends up with a problem: one poem, or several? Perhaps, finally, there is only one, and that one is the resolution of all the possibilities in one reality, a kind of super-form that resolves and incorporates all the several forms.

F. Tension, Irony, Paradox

Plot resolution just mentioned is like the principle of the arch. In an arch the way down is the way up: the arch stands because the force of gravity pulls the several stones down while at the same time pushing them against the keystone. Gravity therefore counteracts itself to keep the entire arch standing; for that matter, the arch can carry great weight—just as a piece of literature might.

This aspect of formalist criticism might be called **tension**, the resolution of opposites, often in irony and paradox. Coleridge enunciated at least part of this notion early on; the New Critics laid great stress on the terminology. The basic terms—tension, irony, paradox—are often nearly indistinguishable, so closely do they work together. C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon summarize tension as "A term introduced by Allen Tate, meaning the integral unity that results from the successful resolution of the conflicts of abstraction and concreteness, of general and particular, of denotation and connotation." One could hardly find a better demonstration of the interrelationships of tension, irony, and paradox than what Robert Penn Warren provided in "Pure and Impure Poetry." In making a case for impure poetry—poetry of "inclusiveness"—Warren not only analyzed the arguments of purists but also provided excellent analyses of poems and passages that include the impure and thereby prove themselves as poetry. Regularly the ironies and paradoxes—the tensions—are at the heart of the success of the items he studies. Near the conclusion of the essay he says:

Can we make any generalizations about the nature of the poetic structure? First, it involves resistances, at various levels. There is the tension between the rhythm of the poem and the rhythm of speech....; between the formality of the rhythm and the informality of the language; between the particular and the general, the concrete and the abstract; between the elements of even the simplest metaphor; between the beautiful and the ugly; between ideas....; between the elements involved in iron....; between the prosaisms and poeticisms. (27)

Let us practice close reading to analyze a brief but well-known poem. Here is the poem:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears;
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.
No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

The poem seems quite simple, easy to grasp and to understand. The speaker—a **persona**, not necessarily the poet—recalls a frame of mind sometime in the past, when “she” (the female figure) was so active and alive that the speaker (mother? father? lover?) could hardly comprehend any earthly touch to the living female figure. Now, in the present, the speaker tells the reader or listener that the female is dead, but does so by circumlocution, or indirect statement. Only one word, “diurnal,” should give even the mildest pause to most readers: it means “daily.” Monosyllabic words dominate the poem. The **meter** is unvarying almost to the point of monotony—alternating soft and strong syllables, usually four of each in the first, third, fifth, and seventh lines; three of each in the other four lines. The rhymes are equally regular and predictable. There is classic restraint and regularity, a tight control.

There is also powerful emotional impact.

Whence comes that impact? Largely from the tightly stated irony and paradox of the poem. The speaker has both gotten what he or she desired and not gotten it: the expectations for the female figure have been realized—and incontrovertibly they have been demolished. Initially the speaker was confident in the eternal life of the female figure. What parent nurtures and enjoys a child while thinking thoughts of death rather than life? What lover thinks constantly if at all that the beloved will die, and prematurely at that? Life seems to ensure continued life. This female figure would somehow transcend earthly normalities, would not even age. The speaker was secure (slumbering) in that assumption. So we know from the first stanza.

But there is a huge gap, and at once a leap beyond that gap, between the first and second stanza. Something happened. Somehow the child or woman died. She already has been buried. The “slumber” of line one has become the eternal sleep of death. The “seal” of the “spirit” has become the coffin seal of the body. Even more poignantly, the life of the dynamic person in lines three and four, where sense perceptions of touching and feeling seem to be transmuted into ethereal or angelic dimensions, is now the unfeeling death of one who has no energy, no vitality, no sense of hearing or seeing. She is no more and no less than a rock or a stone or a tree fixed to the earth. The final irony, that paradox, is that the once motion-filled person is still in motion—but not the vital motion of a human person; she now moves daily a huge distance, a full turn of the earth itself, rotating with a motion not her own, but only that of rocks and stones—gravestones—and rooted trees.

The essential structure, or form, of the poem is the irony that the speaker got precisely what he or she wanted—but hardly in the way anticipated—a structure that at a fairly obvious level contrasts by means of the two stanzas and resolves the paradox by their interaction. A closer look takes the reader beyond this now-evident contrast of two stanzas. The texture of the poem is enriched by the sleep imagery, the sleep of life becoming the sleep of death. The “slumber” of line 1 connotes rest and quiet, even that of a baby or young child. The sibilant sounds of “s” at first suggest that quiet contentment, but the **alliteration** appears throughout the poem, taking on the irony of the second stanza almost like mournful echoes of the

first. “Spirit” and “seal” not only continue the sibilant quality but also in retrospect are ambiguous terms, for “spirit” suggests death as well as life, and “seal” suggests not only security but finality: the coffin and the grave. In the third line the word “thing” at first seems to be a noncommittal, simply denotative word: perhaps the poet was not even able to think of a better word, and used a filler. But in retrospect the female figure now is indeed a “thing,” like a rock or a stone, a mere thing—in truth, dust. Furthermore, “thing” contrasts with its bluntness of sound with the sibilant sounds of so much of the rest of the poem, and anticipates the alternating sounds of the last line, the “s” sounds alternating with the harder sounds of “r” and the consonant clusters “st” and “tr” in “rocks,” “stones,” and “trees.”

Like the reference to sleep, the references to the senses (“feel,” “touch”) in the first stanza are expanded in the second: motion, or its lack, involves the muscles in kinetics and **kinesthesia**; hearing and seeing are explicitly mentioned. But in each of the three cases a negative word precedes the sense word—“no,” “neither,” “nor.” Then in line 7, we meet the awesome reality of kinetic motion without kinesthesia. In “Rolled round” we have the forced motion of the inert body. In a striking change of **metrics**, we realize that the seeming monotony of the alternating soft and hard syllables is broken here by a spondee in place of the dominant iamb (see **foot**), and the spondee in turn is strengthened by the alliterating “r” and the consonance of the “d” at the end of each of the two words, echoed in the initial “d” of “diurnal.” Once having noticed that pounding spondee, we might in retrospect reconsider the two uses of “no” in line 5, for they can be read almost as strongly as the stressed syllables of the line, giving still greater impact to the negative effect of the whole statement. Finally, the contrast between lines 7 and 8 is devastating. If we lift the line totally from its context, we can hear almost an ebullient sound in the seventh line, a glorious sweeping rhythm, aided by the vowels or assonance in the middle several words: “Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course.” But that sweeping, soaring quality comes up against the finality and slowed pace of the heavily impeded line 8, where the punctuation and the three accented monosyllabic words join to give the impact of three strong chords at the end of the symphony.

• • •

We have read a poem. Unless we know from other contexts, we still do not know the name of the author, the nationality, or the era of composition. We do not know who the speaker is, not even the sex of the speaker. We do not know if the poem concerns a real-life situation or a totally fictive one. We do not know whether the author took some similar real-life situation or incident that he or she then adapted and transmuted into a poem. We know only the poem itself, a short piece of richly textured literary art that bears up well under close analysis and resolves its tensions by means of irony and paradox, showing them not only in the contrast between two stanzas but also in seemingly minute details. We have read a poem and have analyzed it by using the formalist approach to literature.

P. S. For the curious, the poem is by William Wordsworth.

We may now turn to the formalist approach in practice.

IV. THE FORMALIST APPROACH IN PRACTICE

A. Word, Image, and Theme: Space-Time Metaphors in "To His Coy Mistress"

August Strindberg, the Swedish novelist and playwright, said in the preface to *Miss Julie* that he "let people's minds work irregularly, as they do in real life." As a consequence, "The dialogue wanders, gathering in the opening scenes material which is later picked up, worked over, repeated, expounded and developed like the theme in a musical composition." Bit by bit as we notice instances of a pattern, we work our way into the experience of the story, poem, or play. As we follow the hints of thematic statement, recognize similar but new images, or identify related symbols, we gradually come to live the experience inherent in the work. The evocative power of steadily repeated images and symbols as **motifs** makes the experience a part of our own consciousness and sensibility. Thus the image satisfies our senses, the pattern our instinctive desire for order, and the thematic statement our intellect and our moral sensibility.

Andrew Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress" presents us with a clear instance of how a particular set of images can open out to themes in the way just described. The opening line of the poem—"Had we but world enough and time"—introduces us to the space-time continuum. Rich in possibilities of verbal patterns, the motif is much more, for the structure of the poem depends on the **subjunctive** concept, the condition contrary to fact, which gives the whole poem its meaning: "Had we," the speaker says, knowing that they do not. From that point on, the **hyperbole**, the playfulness, the grim fear of annihilation are all based on the feeling of the speaker that he is bound by the dimensions of space and time.

Clearly, this poem is a proposition made by the stereotypical male to the stereotypical female. Just as clearly, and in a wholly different realm, the motif of space and time shows this poem to be a philosophical consideration of time, of eternity, of pleasure (hedonism), and of salvation in an afterlife (traditional Christianity). In this way Marvell includes in one short poem the range between lust and philosophy.

On the other hand, we find that the words used to imply this range tend to be suggestive, to shift their meanings so as to demand that they be read on different levels at the same time. Let us begin with instances of the space motif. The space motif appears not only in obvious but also in veiled allusions. In the first section of the poem we find "world," "sit down," "which way/To walk," the suggested distance between "Indian Ganges" and the Humber, the distance implicit in the allusions to the Flood and to the widespread Jews of the Diaspora, "vaster than empires," the sense of spatial movement as the speaker's eyes move over the woman's body, and the hint of spatial relationship in "lower rate." The word "long" (line 4) refers to time, but has spatial meaning, too. Several other words ("before," "till," "go," "last") also have overlapping qualities, but perhaps we strain too far to consider them.

Space and time are clearly related in the magnificent image of the opening lines of the second stanza: "But at my back I always hear/Time's winged chariot hurrying near." The next couplet provides "yonder," "before," "deserts," and, again, a phrase that suggests both space and time: "vast eternity." In the third stanza the word "sits" echoes the earlier use of the word, and several words suggest movement or action in space: "transpires," "sport," "birds of prey," "devour," "languish in slow-chapped power," "roll," "tear.../Thorough." The space motif climaxes in an image that again incorporates the time motif: the sun, by which the man measures time and which will not stand still in space, will be forced to run.

The time motif also appears in its own right, and not only by means of imagery. The word itself appears once in each stanza: near the beginning of stanzas 1 and 2 (lines 1 and 22), and in the third stanza as a central part of the lover's proposition (39). Clustering around this basic unifying motif are these phrases and allusions from the first stanza: the "long love's day," the specific time spans spent in adorning the woman's body and the vaster if less specific "before the Flood" and "Till the conversion of the Jews," and the slow growth of "vegetable love" and the two uses of "age" (lines 17 and 18). At the beginning of stanza 2, the powerful image of time's winged chariot as it moves across a desert includes the words "always" and "eternity." Other time words are "no more" and "long-preserved." There is also the sense of elapsed time in the allusions to the future decomposition of the lovers' bodies. The third stanza, although it delays the use of the word "time," has for its first syllable the forceful, imperative "now." The word appears twice more in the stanza (lines 37 and 38). It is strengthened by "instant," "at once," and "languish in [Time's] slow-chapped power." The phrase "thorough the iron gates of life," though it has more important meanings, also may suggest the passing from temporal life into the not so certain eternity mentioned earlier. The concluding couplet of the poem, as already shown, combines space and time. Further, it may extend time backward to suggest Old Testament days and classic mythology: Joshua stopped the sun so that the Israelites could win a battle, and, even more pertinently, Zeus lengthened the night he spent with Amphitryon's wife.

For the poem is also a love poem, both in its traditional context of the **courtly love** complaint and in the simple fact of its subject matter: fearing that the afterlife may be a vast space without time, the speaker looks for a means of enjoying whatever he can. This *carpe diem* theme is not uncommon; nor is the theme of seduction. What gives the poem unusual power, however, is the overbearing sense of a cold, calculated drive to use the pleasures of sex to counterbalance the threats of empty eternity. Thus a second major motif—after the space-time relationship—used to present the theme is the sexual motif.

We can follow this theme beginning with the title, which immediately sets up the situation. In the second line the word "coyness" leads us into the poem itself; even the word "crime" suggests the unconventional (though crime and conventional morality are reversed in the context of the lover's address). The motif gradually emerges, romantically at first, but more frankly, even brutally, as the speaker continues. In the first stanza the distant Ganges and the redness of rubies

are romantic enough; the word "complain," in the sense of the courtly lover's song, echoes the whole courtly tradition. The word "love" appears twice before the courtly *catalogue* of the lady's beautiful body. The catalogue in turn builds to a climax with the increasing time spans and the veiled suggestiveness of "rest" and "part."

The second stanza, though it continues to be somewhat veiled, is less romantic, and becomes gruesome even while insisting upon sexual love. The lady's beauty will disappear in the marble vault. We may associate the word "marble" with the texture and loveliness of the living woman's skin, but here the lover stresses the time when that loveliness will be transferred to stone. The same type of transference of the lover's song, which finds no echoes in that vault, occurs in a veiled image of unrealized sexual union in life: worms will corrupt the woman in a way that the lover could not. "Quaint honor" is an ironic play on words to suggest the pudendum (*quaint* as in Middle English *queynte*; see Chaucer's "Miller's Tale"). The fires of lust will become ashes (with an implicit comparison to the coldness of marble), and the stanza closes with puns on "private" and "embrace."

The third stanza resumes the romantic imagery of the first ("youthful hue," "morning dew"), but it continues the bolder imagery of the second section. "Pore" is a somewhat unromantic allusion to the woman's body, and "instant fires" recalls the lust and ashes of the preceding stanza. "Sport" takes still a different tack, though it reminds us of the playfulness of the first stanza. After this line, the grimness of the second stanza is even more in evidence. The amorous birds are not turtle-doves, but birds of prey, devouring time—and each other. Although the romantic or sentimental is present in the speaker's suggestion that they "roll all our strength and all/Our sweetness up into one ball," the emphasis on the rough and violent continues in the paradoxical "tear our pleasures with rough strife." Once the coy lady's virginity is torn away, the lover will have passed not through the pearly gates of eternity, but through the iron gates of life. Thus the lover's affirmation of life, compounded of despair and defiance, is produced by his suggestion that the birth canal of life and procreation is preferable to the empty vault and deserts of vast eternity. On the one hand, the instances of the sexual motif point to a degeneration from romantic convention in the first section to scarcely veiled explicitness in the last. But on the other hand, the speaker has proceeded from a question about the nature of eternity and the meaning of the space-time relationship in this world to an affirmation of what he suspects is one of the few realities left him. The very concreteness, the physicality of the sexual motif, provides an answer to the philosophical speculation about space, time, and eternity. Obviously different, the motifs just as obviously fuse to embody the theme of the poem.

There are other, lesser motifs that we could trace had we ourselves space enough and time, such as wings and birds, roundness, and minerals and other things of earth (rubies, marble, iron, ashes, and dust). Each of these serves as a means to greater insights into the poem.

In sum, a formalist reading of "To His Coy Mistress" can originate in a study of images and metaphors—here, space-time images. It can then lead to complexes

of other images—precious stones and marble vaults, chariots and rivers, worms and dust. Finally, it is the nature of a formalist approach to lead us to see how images and metaphors form, shape, confect a consideration of philosophical themes—in this case a speculation on whether love and even existence itself can extend beyond the time we know, and, if they cannot, whether instant gratification is a sufficient response to the question raised.

B. The Dark, the Light, and the Pink: Ambiguity as Form in "Young Goodman Brown"

In short fiction, as in a poem, we can look for the telling word or phrase, the recurring or patterned imagery, the symbolic object or character, the hint of or clue to meaning greater than that of the action or plot alone. Because we can no more justify stopping with a mere summary of what happens outwardly in the story than we can with a mere prose paraphrase of a lyric poem's content, we must look for the key to a story's form in one or more devices or images or motifs that offer a pattern that leads us to larger implications. In short, we seek a point at which the structure of the story coincides with and illuminates its meaning.

As we approach a formalist reading of Hawthorne's story, we should make another point or two of comparison and contrast. The lyric poem generally embraces a dramatic situation. That is, a speaker reacts to an experience, a feeling, an idea, or even a physical sensation. Only one voice is ordinarily present in the lyric poem, but in other literary genres there is usually a group of characters. In fiction the story is told by the author, by one of the characters in the story, or by someone who has heard of an episode. Unlike the novel, the other major fictional type, the short story is characteristically concerned with relatively few characters and with only one major situation, which achieves its climax and solution and thus quickly comes to an end. The short story is restricted in scope, like a news story, for example, but unlike the news story, the short story possesses balance and design—the polish and finish, the completeness that we associate with the work of art. A principle of unity operates throughout to give that single effect that Poe emphasized as necessary.

Though it may seem paradoxical, ambiguity is a formal device in "Young Goodman Brown," particularly in the relationships between light and dark in the story, the interplay of daylight and darkness, of town and dark forest. Richard Harter Fogle's classic study, *Hawthorne's Fiction: The Light and the Dark*, addresses this motif. Let us then look at an aspect of ambiguity not so well known.

In "To His Coy Mistress" the recurrent pattern of words, images, and metaphors of space and time is a means of seeing the form that embodies meaning in that poem. In "Young Goodman Brown" a clearly emphasized image almost immediately takes on symbolic qualities. That is the set of pink ribbons that belongs to Faith, young Brown's wife. The pink ribbons are her emblem as much as the scarlet letter is Hester Prynne's. They are mentioned three times in the first page or so of the story. Near the center of the story, a pink ribbon falls, or seems to fall, from a cloud that Goodman Brown sees, or thinks he sees, overhead. At the

end of the story, when Faith eagerly greets her returning husband, she still wears her pink ribbons. Like the admixture of light and dark in the tale—as in much of Hawthorne—the ribbons are neither red nor white. They are somewhere between: they are ambiguity objectified. Clearly Hawthorne meant them to be suggestive, to be an index to one or more themes in the tale. But suggestive of what? Are they emblematic of love, of innocence, of good? Conversely, do they suggest evil, or hypocrisy, or the ambiguous and puzzling blend of good and evil? Are they symbolic of sex, of femininity, or of Christian faith? It is instructive to recall that brown is also a blended color—it teaches a lesson Brown never learns; that people are morally ambiguous.

1. *Virtues and Vices*

Of this we can be sure: to follow this motif as it guides us to related symbols and patterns of relationships is to probe the complex interweaving of ideas within the story. Specifically, in the interpretation that follows we suggest that the mysterious pink ribbons are—at least among other things—an index to elements of theology. To see that relationship let us first consider the theological matrix of the story.

Because the Puritan setting of “Young Goodman Brown” is basic to the story, we can expect that some of its thematic patterns derive from traditional Christian concepts. For example, readers generally assume that Goodman Brown loses his faith—in Christ, in human beings, or in both. But the story is rich in ambiguities, and it is therefore not surprising that at least one reader has arrived at the opposite conclusion. Thomas E. Connolly has argued that the story is an attack on Calvinism, and that Faith (that is, faith) is not lost in the story. On the contrary, he says, Goodman Brown is confirmed in his faith, made aware of “its full and terrible significance.” Either way—loss of faith or still firmer belief—we see the story in a theological context. Although we do not have to accept either of these views, we do not have to deny them either. Instead, let us accept the theological matrix within which both views exist as the pattern of relationships of faith, hope, and love, and their opposed vices.

We can assume that Hawthorne was familiar with some of the numerous passages from the Bible that bear upon the present interpretation. Twice in the first epistle to the Thessalonians, St. Paul mentions the need for faith, hope, and love (1:3 and 5:8). In 1 Corinthians 13, after extolling love as the most abiding of the virtues, Paul concludes his eloquent description with this statement: “So there abide faith, hope, and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” The author of the first epistle of Peter wrote, “But above all things have a constant mutual love among yourselves; for love covers a multitude of sins” (4:8). To these may be added the telling passages on love of God and neighbor (Matt. 22:36–40 and Rom. 13:9–10) and related passages on love (such as Col. 3:14 and 1 Tim. 1:5). Faith, hope, and love, we should note, have traditionally been called the theological virtues because they have God (*theos*) for their immediate object.

Quite possibly Hawthorne had some of these passages in mind, for it appears that he wove into the cloth of “Young Goodman Brown” a pattern of steady

attention to these virtues often verging on ambiguity. Surely he provided a clue for us when he chose Faith as the name for Goodman Brown’s wife. Hawthorne thereby gave faith first place in the story, not necessarily because faith is the story’s dominant theme, but because it is traditionally listed as the first of the three Christian virtues. Allusions to faith could be made explicit in so many passages in the story and implicit in so many others that they would provide an evident pattern to suggest clearly the other two virtues. (Similarly, the epithet *goodman* could take on symbolic qualities and function almost as Brown’s given name, not simply as something comparable to modern *mister*.)

The story reveals implicit allusions to the virtues of faith, hope, and love, and to their opposed vices, doubt, despair, and hatred.

2. *Symbol or Allegory?*

With these passages in mind, let us recall that there may be both symbolical and allegorical uses of the word “faith.” Such ambivalence can complicate a reading of the story. If the tale is allegorical, for example, it may be that Goodman Brown gained his faith (that is, the belief that he is one of the elect) only three months before the action of the story, when he and Faith were married. The fall of the pink ribbon may be a sin or a fall, just as Adam’s fall was the original sin, a lapse from grace. The allegory may further suggest that Goodman Brown shortly loses his new faith, for “he shrank from the bosom of Faith.” But allegory is difficult to maintain, often requiring a rigid one-to-one equivalence between the surface meaning and a “higher” meaning. Thus if Faith is faith, and Goodman Brown loses the latter, how do we explain that Faith remains with him and even outlives him? Strict allegory would require that she disappear, perhaps even vanish in that dark cloud from which the pink ribbon apparently falls. On the other hand, a pattern of symbolism centering on Faith is easier to handle, and may even be more rewarding by offering us more pervasive, more subtly interweaving ideas that, through their very ambiguity, suggest the difficulties of the theological questions in the story. Such a symbolic view also frees the story from a strict adherence to the Calvinistic concept of election and conviction in the faith, so that the story becomes more universally concerned with Goodman Brown as Everyman Brown.

3. *Loss upon Loss*

Whether we emphasize symbol or allegory, however, Goodman Brown must remain a character in his own right, one who progressively loses faith in his ultimate salvation, in his forebears as members of the elect or at least as “good” people, and in his wife and fellow townspeople as holy Christians. At a literal level, he does not lose Faith, for she greets him when he returns from the forest, she still wears her pink ribbons, she follows his corpse to the grave. Furthermore, she keeps her pledge to him, for it is *he* who shrinks from her. In other words, Brown has not completely lost Faith; rather he has lost faith, a theological key to heaven.

But when faith is lost, not all is lost, though it may very nearly be. Total loss comes later and gradually as Brown commits other sins. We can follow this

emerging pattern when we recall that the loss of faith is closely allied to the loss of hope. We find that, in the story, despair (the vice opposed to hope) can be easily associated with doubt (the vice opposed to faith). For example, the two vices are nearly allied when Goodman Brown recognizes the pink ribbon: "My Faith is gone!" cried he, after one stupefied moment. 'There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come, devil; for to thee is this world given.' And, maddened with *despair*, so that he laughed loud and long, did Goodman Brown grasp his staff and set forth again..." (our italics).

Doubt, although surely opposed to belief, here leads to despair as much as to infidelity. Similarly, many passages that point to faith also point to hope. When Goodman Brown says, "I'll follow her to heaven," he expresses hope as well as belief. When he says, "'With heaven above and Faith below,'" he hopes to "stand firm against the devil." When he cries, "'Faith, look up to heaven,'" he utters what may be his last hope for salvation. Once again we see how motifs function in a formal structure. It is easy to touch the web at any one point and make it vibrate elsewhere.

Thus Brown's hope is eroded by increasing doubt, the opposite of faith. When Goodman Brown reenters the town, he has gone far toward a complete failure to trust in God. His thoughts and his actions when he sees the child talking to Goody Cloyse border on the desperate, both in the sense of despair and in the sense of frenzy. Later, we know that he has fully despaired, "for his dying hour was gloom" and "no hopeful verse" appears on his gravestone."

"But the greatest of these is love," and "love covers a multitude of sins," the Scriptures insist. Goodman Brown sins against this virtue too, and as we follow these reiterations of the structural components we may well conclude that Hawthorne considered this sin the greatest sin in Brown's life. Sins against love of neighbor are important in other Hawthorne stories. It is a sin against love that Ethan Brand and Roger Chillingworth commit. It is a sin against love of which Rappaccini's daughter accuses her lover Guasconti: "Farewell, Giovanni! Thy words of hatred are like lead within my heart; but they, too, will fall away as I ascend. Oh, was there not, from the first, more poison in thy nature than in mine?" In *The House of the Seven Gables*, it is love that finally overcomes the hate-engendered curse of seven generations.

In "Young Goodman Brown" the motif of love-hate is first suggested in the opening scene, when Goodman Brown refuses his wife's request that he remain: "My love and my Faith," replied young Goodman Brown, 'of all nights in the year, this one night must I tarry away from thee.... What, my sweet, pretty wife, dost thou doubt me already, and we but three months married?" Note how Brown turns *his* lack of faith into hers with that question. Significantly, the words "love" and "Faith" are used almost as **synonyms**. When the pink ribbons are mentioned in the next paragraph almost as an epithet ("Faith, with the pink ribbons"), they are emblematic of one virtue as much as the other. Later, Goodman Brown's lack of love of others is further revealed when he learns that he is of a family that has hated enough to lash the "Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem" and

"to set fire to an Indian village." Instead of being concerned for his own neighbor, he turns against Goody Cloyse, resigning her to the powers of darkness: "What if a wretched old woman do choose to go to the devil....?" He turns against Faith and against God Himself when, after the pink ribbon has fallen from the cloud, he says, "'Come, devil; for to thee is this world given.'" To be sure, he still loves Faith enough at the forest conclave to call upon her yet to look to heaven; but next morning when she almost kisses her husband in front of the whole village, "Goodman Brown looked sternly and sadly into her face, and passed on without a greeting." He shrinks from the blessing of "the good old minister," he disparages the prayers of old Deacon Gookin, he snatches a child away from the catechizing of "Goody Cloyse, that excellent old Christian." Thenceforth he stubbornly isolates himself from his fellow men and from his own wife. On the Sabbath day he questions their hymns and their sermons, at midnight he shrinks from his wife, at morning or eventide he scowls at family prayers. Having given his allegiance to the devil, he cannot fulfill the injunction of the second great commandment any more than he can fulfill that of the first. Unable to love himself, he is unable to love his neighbor.

"Faith, hope, and love: these three" he has lost, replacing them with their opposed vices, and the pink ribbons in particular serve as emblems for them all and lead to a double pattern of virtues and vices. In "Young Goodman Brown" the motifs of faith, hope, and love, summed up in the pink ribbons, blend each into each. If the blend sometimes confuses us, like the alternating light and dark of the forest conclave, and more particularly like the mystery of the pink ribbons, it is perhaps no less than Hawthorne intended when he presented Goodman Brown's initiation into the knowledge of good and evil, a knowledge that rapidly becomes confusion.

C. Romance and Reality, Land and River:

The Journey as Repetitive Form in *Huckleberry Finn*

In the preceding section on formalist qualities in "Young Goodman Brown," we noted that the short story is generally concerned with relatively few characters and with only one major situation. The short story achieves its climax and solution, and quickly concludes. The novel, however, contains more characters, and its plot, a number of episodes or situations. Its ampler space provides opportunity for creation of a world, with the consequent opportunity for the reader to be immersed in that world. But because the novel is ample, in comparison with a lyric poem or a short story, it offers a further challenge to its creator to give it its form. In fact, historically the formalist approach in criticism has focused more on lyric poetry and short stories than on the novel. Nevertheless, the novel, too, is an art form, and a close reading will present one or more ways of seeing its form and how the author controls that form.

It will become clear as we approach the form of *Huckleberry Finn* that at one level its form can be simplistically diagrammed as a capital letter "I" lying on its side. At each end there is a block of chapters set on the land and in a world

uses the word *tranquillity* with reference to herself. However, the letter brings little relief to Victor, who—perhaps thinking of the last lines of *Paradise Lost* again—says “but the apple was already eaten, and the angel’s arm bared to drive me from all hope.” Back in Geneva, “The tranquillity which I now enjoyed did not endure.” Victor alludes to his “real insanity.” Ironically, in an effort to gain “a greater degree of tranquillity,” he carries a dagger and pistols as he prepares for marriage. He even “hoped” for his marriage, when “the threat appeared more as a delusion. . . .” And “Elizabeth seemed happy” because his “tranquil demeanour” calmed her mind. During their short ride by boat after the wedding, he alludes to his “despair,” and she, to “hope.”

If Chapter 5 ends with the placid and lovely boat ride, the first page of Chapter 6 is starkly countrapuntal, for within a few paragraphs Elizabeth is dead, she who had been “the best hope, and the purest creature of earth.” Victor knows anew “the agony of despair.” When he comes out of a fainting spell, he sees the monster at the window; the crowd pursues the monster, but failing to find him “we returned hopeless.” The word *hope* recurs in passages like “A fiend had snatched from me every hope of future happiness. . . .”

But how deep is his despair? After Elizabeth’s murder he laments only his own sense of loss—not once does he think, “Poor Elizabeth!” Throughout the novel he blames everyone—his father, Cornelius Agrippa, the Creature—everyone but himself. Thus some readers do not believe in his hopes and despairs because he is so self-deluded.

Victor finds himself in the cemetery where now lie the remains of William, Elizabeth, and his father, and his fresh grief “gave way to rage and despair” (Ch. 7). He calls upon the “spirits of the dead” to aid him in having the Creature “feel the despair that now torments me.” Again, he feels only his despair, no one else’s, and certainly does not feel a sense of responsibility at *causing* the near-universal despair of the characters.

Pursuing the Creature in the icy north, Victor learns that the monster has set out on the sea of ice, at which Victor “suffered a temporary access of despair.” As Victor comes near to the end of his narrative as recorded by Captain Walton, the thematic words we are tracing come in a rush—“hope . . . despair . . . hope . . . hopes were suddenly extinguished. . . . hopes of succour. . . .”

At this point Walton resumes his letter, and he notes that sometimes Victor narrated his story “with a tranquil voice,” which in turn would give vent to rage. About a page later, there is a fairly long paragraph in which Frankenstein contrasts for Walton’s benefit the vast extremes of his hope when he was creating a “sensitive and rational animal” and the “despondency” to which he has fallen. This paragraph, perhaps as much as any other passage in the book, shows the thematic tension to which the exponential words and motifs have pointed for so many pages.

But the motifs continue to the end. In resuming his letter to his sister (the part dated September 2), Walton himself within three successive paragraphs preserves the sequence: “hopes . . . despair . . . hope . . . hope . . . despair. . . .” There are more instances in the letter fragments that follow. Shortly we hear again from

Frankenstein, in another passage that is at the heart of the theme we are tracing. He tells Walton, “Farewell, Walton! Seek happiness in tranquillity, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in the hopes, yet another may succeed.” Once again, tranquillity seems to be a balance point, a middle point between hope and despair.

The Creature now makes his appearance to Walton, and again the recurring words appear—“dared to hope,” and “despair,” and “excess of my despair,” “loathing despair,” “I falsely hoped.” The final irony is his “For whilst I destroyed his hopes, I did not satisfy my own desires.” As the novel comes to an end, the Creature plans to immolate himself on the fires of his “funeral pile.” Those fires, we note, will be on the ice of the north, and these twin symbols of hell are the last images the book gives us.

In review, the form of the novel is largely shaped by the contrast between hubristic hopes and human despair. Vaulting ambition, the novel seems to say, will carry with it the potential of massive failure. The words *hope* and *despair* are clear exponents of this theme, along with synonyms and countrapuntal episodes that have much the same function. Along the way there are associated motifs, like electricity and lightning and “blasting,” and perhaps even more tantalizing the recurrent word “tranquillity,” for the subtheme of placidity plays off the two extremes like a melody in a symphony or opera that faintly suggests there might be another way, somewhere.

V. SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- The formalist critic abandons historical and biographical information and instead focuses on the text as a discrete object. This approach is sometimes characterized as “art for art’s sake.”
- Formalist critics examine the intrinsic factors of the work’s structure. Is it presented in chapters, stanzas, or sections?
- Formalist critics came to be called the New Critics when several prominent critics adopted the name in the 1930s. Many of these, such as Robert Penn Warren, were members of an intellectual circle at Vanderbilt University who called themselves the Fugitives. Many were also poets themselves.
- Reader-Response Theory: This approach is inspired by but differs from formalism in that meaning is found not in the text but in the reader’s imaginative interaction with what is presented by the author. Accordingly, not so much form but strategies and practices of reading are emphasized.
- Formalists distinguish between organic and merely external form.
- Formalists look for such textual features as texture, image, and symbol; fallacies; point of view; the speaker’s voice; and tension, irony, and paradox.
- Other important formal concerns include denotative and connotative language, ambiguity, dialectic, objective correlative, and conceits.

VI. LIMITATIONS OF THE FORMALIST APPROACH

By the 1950s, dissent was in the air. Still outraged by the award of the Bollingen Prize for Poetry to Ezra Pound in 1949, some voices thought they detected a pronounced elitism, if not more sinister rightist tendencies, in the New Critics, their disciples, and the poets to whom they had granted the favor of their attention. By 1955, some doubters were pointing to the formalist critics' absorption with details, their greater success with intensive than with extensive criticism, their obvious preference for poets like Eliot and Yeats, and their lack of success with the novel and the drama (Holman, "The Defense of Art" 238-39).

Less general caveats have emphasized the restriction of formalist criticism to a certain kind of literature simply because that kind proved itself especially amenable—lyric poetry generally but especially English poetry of the seventeenth century and the "modernist" poetry that stems from Pound and Eliot, and some virtually self-selecting fiction that significantly displays poetic textures (for example, *Moby-Dick* and *Ulysses*). New Critics tended to ignore or undervalue some poetry and other genres that do not easily respond to formalist approaches. The problems increase whenever the language of the literary work tends to approach that of the polemicist. The formalist approach sometimes seems to lapse into a treasure hunt for objective correlatives, conceits, the image, or ironic turns of phrase. It has not seemed to work particularly well for most American poetry written since 1950; as students often point out, it tends to overlook feeling and appears cold in its absorption with form.

Robert Langbaum pronounced the New Criticism "dead—dead of its very success." For, said he, "We are all New Critics nowadays, whether we like it or not, in that we cannot avoid discerning and appreciating wit in poetry, or reading with close attention to words, images, ironies, and so on" (11). There is more to criticism than "understanding the text, [which] is where criticism begins, not where it ends" (14). Langbaum believed that the New Criticism took us for a time outside the "main stream of criticism" (represented by Aristotle, Coleridge, and Arnold), and that we should return, with the tools of explication and analysis given us by the New Critics, to that mainstream. That is, instead of insisting upon literature's autonomy, we must resume relating it to life and ideas, including political ideas, radical theories, and cultural context.

Still later, various charges were leveled against the New Critics, and a number of them will be noted in succeeding chapters.

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